

Four Hidden Costs of User-Created Trails

Coconino County Parks & Recreation
January 2009

Well-designed and well-maintained corridor trails create high-quality user experiences. Equally important, they focus the environmental impacts of recreation into designated public areas where they can be effectively managed. Unmanaged recreation, particularly unauthorized roads and trails, produces four unwanted outcomes.

1. Increases the risk of catastrophic wildfire

~ Coconino National Forest, *1999 Environmental Assessment for Fort Valley Ecosystem Restoration*

2. Destroys, fragments, or degrades wildlife habitat

~ Arizona Game & Fish Department, *2006 Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy* finds that eight of eleven habitat types in the Coconino Plateau ecoregion are significantly degraded by roads and trails created by motorized and non-motorized users.

3. Increases unwelcome behavior, parties, and trash

~ Coconino National Forest, *1999 Environmental Assessment for Fort Valley Ecosystem Restoration* finds there are “about four miles of open forest system roads for every section (640 acres) of forested land, two times greater than the road density suggested by the Coconino *Forest Plan*. In addition, there are numerous unofficial roads created by hunters and recreationists, as indicated by the presence of two track dirt depressions. There are also numerous nighttime teenage parties and transient camps.”

4. Reduces equitable public access

~ International City/County Management Association, *2005 Active Living and Social Equity: Creating Healthy Communities for All Residents* finds that many neighborhoods lack adequate access to open spaces such as trails and greenways. Availability of open space does not necessarily mean that a neighborhood will use it. Access needs to be safe, close, appealing, and well-maintained if open space is to promote physical activity as a part of daily routines.

What to do?

“Meet with specific communities and County officials and consider input from Forest road and trail management; discourage proliferation of unneeded trails; create a primary trail system that serves as a collector for trails that originate in neighborhoods; convert some roads that are not needed for the road system into motorized trails; and provide pass through corridors for vehicles and ATV/motorcycles that lead to separate motorized trails or to the secondary Forest road system.” ~ *Flagstaff/Lake Mary Forest Plan Amendment 2002, Doney Park Management Area*

Two Common Concerns About Trails

Coconino County Parks & Recreation
January 2009

Well-designed and well-maintained corridor trails create high-quality user experiences. Equally important, they provide significant public benefits for community development and health as well as local economic activity and property tax base. Neighbors often wonder whether new trails projects will be beneficial. Here are two issues they worry about:

1. Trails lower property values

~ John L. Crompton, 2004, *The Proximate Principle: Impact of Parks, Open Space and Water Features on Residential Property Values and the Property Tax Base*, reviews the research and finds that greenway trails have no negative impact on either saleability of property or its value. Nationwide, studies indicate that access to trails may improve a property's attractiveness to buyers, and there is anecdotal evidence to support this in the Flagstaff area.

Properties Near Bike Trails Draw Buyers

Source: The Wall Street Journal, Nancy Keates (08/22/2008)

Thanks in part to high gas prices, buyers are keenly interested in homes that are in close proximity to bike trails, according to reports from real estate practitioners in bicycle-friendly areas. Craig Della Penna, an associate with Murphys Realtors Inc. in Northampton, Mass., estimates that half of his 18 closings last year came from emphasizing homes near bike trails...

2. Trails increase neighborhood crime

~ Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, *1998 Rail-Trails and Safe Communities: the Experience on 372 Trails* compares the incidence minor and major crimes using FBI crime reports for 1995. Nationally, trails were extremely safe environments for major crimes (mugging, assault, forcible rape, or murder). Such crimes are hundreds of times less likely to occur on rail-trails than in the larger urban, suburban, or rural setting. Similarly, burglary, classified as a minor crime, was extremely uncommon. Other minor crimes (trespassing, graffiti, littering, sign damage, and motorized use) were reported as a percent of trails participating in the survey. Here, between 3-26% of rail-trails experienced minor crimes. Graffiti was the most common minor crime in urban settings (26%). In suburban and rural settings, the most frequent minor crime was littering (24%).